

# Keep Your Cat(s) Indoors



**CATS INDOORS!**

THE CAMPAIGN FOR SAFER BIRDS & CATS

*Brian Vernachio, Sanctuary Director, New Jersey Audubon Society, Plainsboro Preserve, and NJ Cats Indoors! Coordinator*

Asked to name invasive species in New Jersey, the person on the street in New Brunswick or Glassboro might be able to think of *Phragmites* (common reed) or maybe even gypsy moth (*Lymantria dispar*). Asked to name dangers for wildlife, some New Jerseyans might mention pollution, habitat destruction, over-harvest, or even the West Nile virus. In fact, the major contributor to declining wildlife in the State is the tremendous human population growth and associated development sprawl over the past 50 years. This sprawl increasingly fragments wildlife habitat and makes it susceptible to invasion by alien species.

One alien species that represents an increasing threat to wildlife is much closer to us than we think: the domestic cat (*Felis sylvestris catus*) kills an enormous number of birds and small mammals annually. Cats were first brought to North America by European explorers and colonists, and native wildlife has few defenses against them. New Jersey, located at the crossroads of migration, is a major hub for migrating birds and nesting threatened and endangered species. Here cats kill not only common species, but also animals whose populations are declining, such as piping plover (*Charadrius melodus*), eastern bluebird (*Sialia sialis*) and ovenbird (*Seiurus aurocapillus*).

According to a 2001 American Veterinary Medical Association survey, New Jersey has more than 1.6 million household cats, two-thirds of which spend time outdoors. While the number of birds killed per year varies with the individual cat, many studies suggest that an average of 40 would seem a conservative estimate. If that is the case,



New Jersey is losing some 40 million birds to domestic cats every year. Add to that the kills made by numerous stray and feral cats, who tend to be more active hunters, and the number becomes truly frightening. The number of small mammals killed is even greater. Putting bells on cats does little to stop their hunting. In one study, the average bell-toting cat actually killed more birds than its bell-less counterparts. Even de-clawed cats can still hunt effectively. Whatever its condition or disposition, an outdoor cat is probably a killer.

In addition to protecting wildlife, keeping cats indoors benefits their health. Indoor cats are exposed to fewer outdoor health threats and have a much longer average lifespan than outdoor cats. Many outdoor cats are killed or injured by automobiles. They get into fights with dogs, wildlife, and other cats, or are subject to abuse by people. In some areas cats may even encounter larger natural predators—coyotes are known to prey on domestic cats. Further, the transmission of parasites and diseases including feline leukemia and distemper are other outdoor threats. Vaccines for these diseases are not 100% effective. Many hazards—such as fleas, ringworm, hookworms, roundworms, cat-scratch disease, toxoplasmosis, and rabies—can be transmitted to humans and wildlife. Indoor cats present fewer threats to wildlife, to themselves, and to their human companions.

Some of New Jersey's invasive species present us with difficult if not intractable problems; the solution to our cat troubles is simple and can start with you. Keep your cat indoors and encourage others to do the same. The immediate result will be healthy wildlife and healthy cats.

**For more information about the benefits of keeping cats indoors, and about the Cats Indoors! campaign, or to help out with the campaign, contact your local New Jersey Audubon center, or see New Jersey Audubon's website at:**

**[www.njaudubon.org/Conservation/CatsIndoors](http://www.njaudubon.org/Conservation/CatsIndoors).**